



Keeping Our Promise to Arkansas's Servicemembers, Veterans and their Families

During her tenure in the United States Senate, Senator Blanche Lincoln has led efforts to increase benefits, improve health care quality and accessibility, and provide valuable support services for Arkansas's servicemembers, veterans and their families. With an increasing number of men and women returning from overseas service, it is critical that we honor their commitment to protecting our country with benefits and services that reflect their sacrifice.

Senator Lincoln is fighting to improve HEALTH CARE for servicemembers and veterans by:

- Providing the VA with the biggest funding increase in its history, which has allowed the VA to better meet its current and future challenges by making needed investments in quality health care, expanding access and improving delivery of care, and enhancing numerous benefits provided to the over 260,000 Arkansas veterans and their families.
- Securing timely funding for veterans' health care by providing funding for the Veterans Health Administration one-year in advance of the regular appropriations process. This advance funding will ensure that veterans' health care receives timely and predictable funding each and every year.
- Prohibiting increases in TRICARE military health insurance premiums, deductibles, and co-payments.
- Sponsoring legislation to ensure that health assessments for members of the Selected Reserve are followed by government treatment to correct any medical or dental readiness deficiencies. Providing this care at the onset of a deficiency would limit the time diverted for treatment during pre-mobilization training, and would ultimately create a more medically and dentally ready deployable force.
- Providing additional resources for the Veterans Benefits Administration to hire more disability claims processors, invest in new technologies and increase training resources so it can better meet its current workload and address its backlog of pending claims.
- Authorizing new programs aimed at improving the VA's capacity to care for women veterans' mental and physical health care needs, and assessing the care we are currently providing to female veterans.
- Ensuring a smoother transition for wounded warriors moving from military health care to the VA.

Senator Lincoln is fighting to improve ACCESS TO CARE for servicemembers and veterans by:

- Supporting the creation of the VA's Office of Rural Health, tasked with creating demonstration projects and centers of excellence to improve health care and expand access for veterans living in Arkansas and other rural areas of the country.
- Urging a mileage reimbursement rate increase for veterans traveling to receive VA care.
- Championing legislation to authorize transportation grants for Veterans Service Organizations to provide better transportation service in rural areas; to establish Centers of Excellence for rural health research and education; and to authorize the VA to conduct demonstration projects on alternatives for expanding care for veterans in rural areas.
- Expanding access to TRICARE and the VA for members of the National Guard and Reserves who have recently returned from service in Iraq and Afghanistan.

- Urging the creation of new Community-based Outpatient Clinics to reach more veterans in rural areas of Arkansas and other underserved areas of the country. In July of 2010, the VA will be opening a new CBOC in Ozark to serve more veterans in north-central and northwest Arkansas.
- Addressing a gap in health care coverage for reservists who have retired but are not yet 60 years old by allowing them to purchase TRICARE Standard health care coverage.
- Providing approximately \$2.75 million this year toward programs in or around Arkansas to enhance access to mental health and substance use for returning Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, and to expand telehealth services. This includes needed funding to expand a Texarkana-area project to utilize Home Based Primary Care to improve timely access to care for patients with complex medical needs living in rural areas of southwest Arkansas.

Senator Lincoln is fighting to ensure the VA is providing quality MENTAL HEALTH CARE for servicemembers and veterans by:

- Making needed investments in mental health care initiatives to ensure the VA has the capacity to deal with the increasing complexity and number of cases of Traumatic Brain Injury and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.
- Creating a national program to recruit and train returning servicemembers for positions as peer-support counselors, expanding outreach efforts, and implementing new supports such as a national veterans' suicide prevention plan.
- Increasing training for military and VA health care professionals treating mental health issues and establishing a toll-free hotline for patients and their families to report problems with medical facilities or patient care.
- Directing the VA to contract with community mental health centers to provide treatment, support services and readjustment counseling in areas of Arkansas and other states where there is inadequate access to a VA medical center.
- Implementing an effective system for diagnosing these hidden wounds and requiring more frequent mental health assessments for servicemembers before and upon return from combat.

Senator Lincoln is fighting to provide ENHANCED BENEFITS for servicemembers, veterans and their families by:

- Championing efforts to allow veterans to draw full and immediate concurrent receipt of disability and retirement pay. These men and women should not have to worry about their pensions being cut simply because they receive a disability payment as a result of their service to this nation.
- Ensuring that VA disability income qualified for the economic stimulus payment so that nearly 250,000 disabled veterans nationwide were eligible to receive a rebate check in 2008.
- Fighting to provide concurrent receipt of Dependency and Indemnity Compensation and Survivor Benefit Program annuity payments for spouses and children of servicemembers killed in action.
- Addressing inequities in the VA's Dependency and Indemnity Compensation program by: 1) increasing the basic DIC rate so it is equivalent to the rate paid to survivors of federal civilian employees, 2) providing a graduated scale of benefits so many survivors are no longer denied benefits because of an arbitrary eligibility restriction, and 3) allowing surviving spouses who remarry after age 55 to retain DIC benefits.
- Reducing barriers to absentee voting for military personnel and overseas voters.
- Providing a pension and recognizing the service of the U.S. Merchant Marines who served honorably in World War II.

Senator Lincoln is fighting to improve EDUCATIONAL BENEFITS for servicemembers and veterans by:

- Implementing the biggest expansion of the G.I. Bill since its inception during WWII. Senator Lincoln led the fight to enhance benefits for activated members of our Selected Reserve, and the final legislation included her provision to allow reservists, such as those in Arkansas' 39th Infantry Brigade, to accrue education benefits with successive activations – making their benefits more reflective of the service they have rendered.
- Calling for an increase in the G.I. Bill rate for members of the Selected Reserve to keep pace with their increased service and the rising costs of higher education. This bill would tie education benefit rates under the Selected Reserve G.I. Bill to the national average cost of tuition.

Senator Lincoln is fighting to recognize and improve benefits for our GUARDSMEN AND RESERVISTS by:

- Lowering the retirement eligibility age for National Guard and Reserve members.
- Reducing the burden on National Guard and Reserve members traveling for drill by lowering the travel reimbursement threshold to 50 miles one-way, including reimbursement of mileage, meals, and lodging. Defraying the costs associated with travel to a drill site is simply the right thing to do.
- Empowering our National Guard by elevating the rank of Chief of the National Guard; making the Chief the prime military advisor to the Defense Secretary and the Joint Chiefs; and giving the National Guard the ability to budget and purchase equipment related to home defense.
- Implementing “Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Programs” in Arkansas and other states to ensure that Guardsmen returning from overseas service receive the reintegration and support services they need and are aware of the various benefits they have earned.
- Providing support to reservists and their families by making benefit and health care programs more effective and accessible.
- Honoring members of the reserve components who have 20 or more years of service by formally recognizing them as veterans.

Senator Lincoln is fighting on behalf of MILITARY FAMILIES by:

- Increasing the number of student support personnel in underserved schools in Arkansas and across the country to help children, many from military families, overcome mental illness or family issues and receive the assistance of a trained professional.
- Increasing reimbursement to military families for the cost of traveling to specialty care providers.
- Easing the administrative burden faced by servicemen and women who must relocate to a new state by giving military spouses the option of sharing the service member's same home state. Doing so would significantly improve a spouse's ability to vote, maintain personal property, gain employment, and attain an education.
- Protecting military families' access to crucial nutrition programs when a family member is overseas and improve consistency across federal food assistance programs.
- Increasing our investment in programs such as the Homeowners Assistance Program which provides relief to military homeowners.

For her work of behalf of servicemembers, veterans and their families, Senator Lincoln has been awarded the 2008 G.V. “Sonny” Montgomery Eagle Award from the Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States (EANGUS), the 2009 Award of Merit from the Military Coalition, and the 2009 National Legislative Advocacy Award from the Association of the United States Navy.